

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS: TRUTH AND HEALING

Introduction

Focus

For over 100 years many native children were taken away from their families and forced to stay at residential schools. In 2008 the Canadian government apologized for the suffering and abuse many experienced. But the apology wasn't enough to heal what was endured by so many. To that end, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is hearing from some of those affected in the hopes of promoting healing.

Definitions

Truth (noun)

- a fact that has been verified
- a true statement

Reconcile (verb)

- make (one thing) compatible with (another)
- harmonize
- accept as inevitable

Note to Teachers and Students

The exploration of sensitive and controversial issues may provoke emotional responses in students. A high degree of care should be taken before the lesson to ensure that the learning environment allows for conflicting sets of values to be processed analytically and with respect for differences in peoples and their cultures, identities, and world views. As with all activities that involve complex thinking, teachers should build in time for reflection and metacognitive activities.

Sharing Your Thoughts

1. Should people be held accountable for past actions? Why?
2. Should victims of historical crimes be helped by those who wronged them?
3. What do you already know about Indian Residential Schools?
4. Why do you think there is a government commission with the aim of acknowledging the experiences, impacts, and consequences of Indian Residential Schools?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has a five-year mandate to uncover and share with all Canadians information about what happened to aboriginal children in Canada's residential schools. The TRC relies on both the testimonies and written documents from individuals who attended the schools, their families, the larger aboriginal community, and the officials who ran the schools. The commission is one product of the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history: Indian Residential School

Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). The other significant result of the IRSSA is financial compensation for students who attended the schools.

The TRC's mandate is to collect a historical record and to promote the understanding of this historical record for future generations. One of the main methods of creating this historical record is through the official documentation of survivor stories. The commission will host seven national events and dozens of smaller community forums in an effort to hear the truth.

Focus on Vocabulary

1. Consider the various meanings of the words *truth* and *reconciliation* (see margin item on this page).
2. Why do you think both words, rather than just one, were chosen as the mandate of the commission?

To Consider

What challenges do you think the TRC will face in gathering testimonies and evidence from people who lived through a residential school experience?

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Video Review

Pre-viewing Questions

Before you watch the video discuss the following questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Do you think it is important for the stories of the survivors of residential schools to be documented? Why or why not?

2. Why do you think some survivors want to share their stories?

3. Why do you think some survivors do not want to share their stories?

4. What do you think the TRC could do to insure that survivors that decide to share their stories are supported emotionally, spiritually, physically, and financially?

Viewing Questions

1. For how many years have residential schools existed in Canada?

2. What problem did the commission face in its first year?

3. What actions were taken by Gitan Spirit—a group of survivors—to cope with their past?

4. Why are aboriginal people in remote reserves underrepresented in the TRC's work?

5. List examples of the abuses suffered by children at residential schools.

6. How did Peter Kelly get a new name?

7. List examples of the effects of a residential school experience on the survivors.

Post-Viewing Questions

1. Based on what you have seen in the video, return to the Pre-viewing Questions and add new information.
2. Now that you have learned more about the residential school experience, do you believe this is a chapter in Canadian history that should be studied by all Canadians? Why?

3. Could something like this happen today? Could one group in Canada be singled out and treated in an inhumane manner? Explain your answer.

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Canada's Residential School History

Did you know . . .

Canada is not the only country with a history of residential schools for aboriginal children. From 1910 to 1970, the Australian government took aboriginal children away from their parents and placed them in foster homes and institutions.

Before and During Reading

Create a chart in your notes (see example below). Record point-form notes in the chart under each subheading and add your own questions for continued research.

Information on Residential Schools	My Questions
1. What were residential schools? - - -	
2. What was the purpose of residential schools? - - -	

1. What were residential schools?

For over 100 years, aboriginal children were taken from their families or sent by their families to Indian Residential Schools. Over 150 000 students attended Canada's Indian Residential Schools from the 1870s to the 1970s. The majority of schools were run by churches. There were many types of schools, from small day schools on and off reserves to large industrial and boarding schools in remote towns and cities. Some children attended these schools for a short time while others attended for their entire childhood (until 16 years of age).

2. What was the purpose of these schools?

One of the main goals was to assimilate aboriginal children into European culture. Racist views were prevalent among mainstream Canadians—many of whom felt that it was in the aboriginal child's best interest to be removed from an "inferior" way of life. Most children were taught reading, writing, and math,

but many others were simply used for manual labour.

3. Why did parents let their children go to these schools?

Many aboriginal parents wanted their children to go to school. They believed that the government was offering a better future for their children. In many cases, parents simply had no choice whether or not to send their children to the schools. Since all aboriginal people were considered wards of the state, they had to follow the orders of Indian agents whose job description included making sure that all aboriginal children went to school. Frequently children tried to escape the schools to return to their families, only to be sent back. No one knows how many children may have "disappeared" from the schools never to be heard from again.

4. What was it like to attend one of these schools?

The schools were poorly built, maintained, and equipped. Children were forbidden to speak their native

Did you know . . .

The Anglican, Presbyterian, and United churches apologized in the 1990s for the treatment students received at church-run schools. The Roman Catholic Church officially apologized in 2009. The RCMP, in 2004, also apologized for its involvement in the residential school system.

Further Research

For more information on Canada's residential school history, see *CBC News in Review*, September 2008.

dialects; some were beaten for doing so. Others were beaten and physically abused for not paying attention in class or for no reason at all. And, tragically some schools became a haven for sexual predators who abused children. Some schools became infected with diseases, and undisclosed numbers of children died as a result.

5. Why didn't anybody do anything about the abuse?

For the most part, aboriginal students did not bring these abuses to the attention of the authorities. They did not have any power, they lived in fear and shame, and the commonly held opinion at the time was that if children were beaten by an adult then the child deserved it. In terms of sexual abuse, the children were caught in a trap; any accusation against a priest, nun, teacher, or other student was likely to fall on deaf ears. A best-case scenario would see the accusation ignored; a worst-case scenario would mean more abuse.

It is now known that a few government officials and church members did complain about the conditions of the schools, but they were ignored by those in more powerful institutional positions.

6. What happened to change the attitude of mainstream Canada?

In 1989 Canadians learned that some Christian Brothers had been routinely abusing non-aboriginal orphan boys at Mount Cashel orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland. Due to widespread media coverage of this event, people started talking more openly about institutions where abuse of children had occurred. A year later, Phil Fontaine, who would eventually lead the Assembly of First Nations, revealed that he had been

physically and sexually abused when he was a student at a residential school. The silence had been broken and the truth was coming out. Eventually, over 10 000 lawsuits were filed against the Canadian government and the churches that ran the schools.

In 1998, the Liberals offered residential school students an apology for the abuses they suffered and the role the government played in establishing the schools. Many felt the apology did not go far enough. Negotiations were pursued in earnest at the turn of the century and, by 2006, an agreement between the residential school students, the government, and the churches was struck.

In the largest class-action lawsuit settlement in Canadian history, all residential school students were to receive \$10 000 and an additional \$3 000 for each year they were in school. This amounted to an average payout of about \$25 000 to the over 80 000 surviving residential school students. Those suffering emotional, physical, or sexual abuse could apply for more compensation, to a maximum of \$275 000. The government put aside \$2-billion to handle the costs of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA).

The IRSSA called for more than just compensation. It also called for the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission to unveil the history and legacy of the residential school system as well as a formal apology from the government in the House of Commons. In June 2008, the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began its five-year mandate, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood in Parliament and issued the much-sought-after apology.

7. What is the impact of the residential schools period on aboriginal people today?

The inter-generational impact of the residential school experience can be seen in self-destructive behaviours and domestic violence in some aboriginal homes. Since many generations of aboriginal children spent the greater part of their childhood in residential schools they did not receive the love and care of their parents, grandparents, or siblings. The abuse and neglect they suffered left its mark on their adult lives, as well as the lives of their children, in the form of further abuse and neglect.

As adults, many survivors of residential school abuse found themselves struggling alone with the pain, rage, and grief of unresolved

trauma. When faced with the responsibility of marriage and parenthood themselves, many had no prior experience they could draw on to help them cope with the demands of family life. Some survivors became psychologically overwhelmed and sought escape from the pressures, turning to substance abuse and self-harm. Some survivors became revictimized by domestic violence or became abusers themselves.

The unresolved trauma that resulted from residential school abuse continues to impact individuals, families, communities, and our country.

Source: "Canada's Residential School History," *CBC News in Review*, September 2008

Follow-up

1. What were your reactions when reading the overview of Canada's residential school history? Why did you feel this way?
2. What challenges do you think the TRC will face in gathering testimonies and evidence from people who lived through an experience in a residential school?
3. What do you think is being done/should be done to help survivors of residential schools to heal from traumatic events?

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Quote

"The truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free and pave the way to reconciliation."
— Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, (www.trc-cvr.ca)

Did you know . . .

In 1995, the South African government created a truth and reconciliation commission. This commission asked witnesses to detail violations of their human rights during apartheid. People who had committed violent acts could also give testimony and request amnesty from legal prosecution.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a key component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. It was created in the hope that aboriginal residential school students could be given the chance—with great care, sensitivity, and respect—to tell their stories, and that those stories could live on in a new historical record.

Why did many aboriginal people want the creation of the TRC in addition

to financial settlements? Aboriginal approaches to justice are rooted in the belief that an important first step in the healing process is for a victim of abuse to face the truth of what happened. The healing process also involves having the perpetrators of abuse face the truth and accept responsibility for their actions. In order for a positive future to exist for aboriginal peoples and non-aboriginal peoples as individuals and as groups, the truth must be heard and shared.

Activity

1. Read the poem entitled "Strength & Courage" from the Assembly of First Nations Web site (www.afn.ca/residentialschools/photos.html).
2. In your own words describe this poem.
3. How do you think the poem relates to the historical and personal struggles and victories of aboriginal people?

A Difficult First Year for the TRC

On June 1, 2008, the TRC started its work under the direction of commission chair Justice Harry LaForme, an Ontario judge and member of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, and his fellow commissioners Claudette Dumont-Smith, a health professional, and Jane Brewin Morley, a lawyer. Unfortunately, the initial three commissioners did not agree on the purposes and processes of the commission, and the first year of the commission's work was bogged down in conflicts between the appointed leaders.

Harry LaForme eventually resigned from his position as chair of the commission. He gave three reasons: conflict with his two other commissioners, interference from the Assembly of First Nations, and lack of financial independence from the federal government.

The commission began again in 2009 with a new chair, Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, a Métis and judge from the Interlake area of Manitoba. Two new commissioners were also appointed: Chief Wilton Littlechild and Marie Wilson. Many members of the aboriginal community were disappointed that the TRC was on hold for a year because of problems over the leadership of the commission.

The Mandate of the TRC

What does the TRC hope to achieve in its five-year mandate? It will compile a historical record of the residential system, write a report about its findings, and establish a research centre to act as a permanent resource for Canadians. It will also host seven events across Canada to promote awareness of its purposes and to gather statements. The first event took place at The Forks market in

Further Research

You can learn more about the Missing Children Research Group in the CBC news report "Residential school graves research a daunting task" at www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2010/03/02/residential-school-deaths.html?ref=rss#ixzz0yWO2cYDw.

Winnipeg, a historical gathering place for aboriginal people, on June 15–19, 2010. Subsequent events will take place in Alberta, British Columbia, the Maritimes, northern Canada, Quebec, and Saskatchewan.

The Commission supports commemoration activities that honour residential school survivors and pay tribute to them in a lasting manner. The commission is also helping the work of the Missing Children Research Group, which is documenting how many children died, went missing, or were buried in unmarked graves at residential schools across the country from the late 1800s through much of the 1900s. The

TRC will also provide health supports in the form of counselling at all TRC events.

Opposing Viewpoints on the Work of the TRC

There are critics of the TRC who believe that the work of the commission is to whitewash—or cover up—crimes of the past. Others do not agree with the purpose and methods of asking for public sharing of personal stories. Some people insist that justice will prevail only if the victims prosecute the people and churches that abused students in the residential schools.

Activity

Read the three quotations below. For each quotation:

1. Summarize the viewpoint expressed. (How does the person feel about the TRC?)
2. What two additional questions would you like to ask the person regarding their views?
3. If the three people met to talk about the TRC, is there any purpose that they might agree upon?
4. What advice would you give the TRC commissioners regarding their mandate and purposes?

“The long-heralded ‘official’ government commission into Indian Residential Schools in Canada opened in Winnipeg on June 16 to an unprecedented media fanfare. If not an actual inquiry, the event was at least good entertainment, featuring rock bands, ‘healing tents’ run by the very churches responsible for torturing and killing children, and a deluge of ‘reconciliation’ rhetoric that would make the worst spin doctor blush. One actual survivor of the residential schools summed up the spectacle when she observed, ‘They wouldn’t even pay my way here, and when I got up to speak, all I got was five minutes to tell my story. Then I was told I couldn’t

name any names or ever sue the church. I felt like I was being raped all over again.” — “Summer update from the Friends and Relatives of the Disappeared (Canada),” July 7, 2010, www.hiddenfromhistory.org

“Joe Tom Sayers, a project manager of the Community Healing Strategy Project of the Shingwauk Education Trust, a vast collective along the northern shore of Lake Superior, says these reunions can be a place for former students to open up. ‘These reunions are the ideal venue for truth-taking, healing, and reconciliation,’ he says. But he believes the process of reconciling with the rest

of Canada won't come about because of the TRC alone. 'What motivates a lot of people to come forward is not to tell Canadians but to pass it on to another generation—their children and grandchildren and help them understand. . . . Nothing happens overnight. . . . It's a process. I can't see it happening within the mandate of the TRC. It will take a longer time.'" — "Some big questions for the slow-starting commission," July 10, 2009, www.cbc.ca/canada

"Ian Littledeer was five years old when his father took him, an older brother, and a younger sister on a boat ride from their home, across Lac Seul in Northwestern Ontario, to start a new life. Littledeer didn't know where he was headed. 'I thought I was going to town to spend

time with my dad,' he recalled. 'He didn't say anything.' Instead, as required by law, Littledeer's father turned the children over to the Pelican Lake Indian Residential School at Sioux Lookout, Ontario, and what Littledeer calls 'the darkest days of my life.' From 1965 until 1976, Littledeer endured a lonely and strictly regulated life in a dormitory with other native children from around the region. It's a story he's anxious to tell the newly reconstructed Truth and Reconciliation Commission because he thinks the telling will help free him from a troubled past. 'It will mean a lot to me,' he says. 'It means that someone would listen to what happened and get a better understanding of what I went through.'" — "Ian Littledeer's story," July 10, 2009, www.cbc.ca/canada

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How do we reconcile our shared past?

Definitions

Presentism is the tendency to judge the past based on the different beliefs, values, habits, attitudes, and behaviours of the present.

Relativism is any theory that states that nothing can be judged because of the unique factors creating the circumstances.

Further Research

To learn more about historical perspective taking and the ethical dimensions of history, visit the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project Web site at www.historybenchmarks.ca.

Ethical Considerations in History

When exploring historical events, many ethical considerations arise. Why did people treat others inhumanely? Why did other people living at the time not stand up to injustice? Why were certain people subjected to harsher treatment and realities than others?

The past has been compared to a “foreign country,” one that we cannot fully understand due to the fact that we are situated in a different time and space. In considering the past, we travel to this foreign country to examine beliefs, values, habits, attitudes, and behaviours that in some ways resemble the present, but in many significant ways do not.

Should we pass judgment on the past?

As a student of history, you will naturally be inclined to pass judgment on the people and events of the past. As you do this, you should keep in mind what historians call “presentism,” the tendency to judge the past based on the different beliefs, values, habits, attitudes, and behaviours of the present.

An example of presentism would be to say that all people involved in

the residential school system should be charged with endangering youth and child abuse. The presentism in this statement is revealed in the fact that current youth and child protection laws did not exist in the period under question. This reveals something about the “differentness” of the past.

You should also be aware of a tendency for those studying history to engage in relativism, the belief that we can’t judge others because we didn’t walk in their shoes. An example of relativism can be heard when people claim that no one can be found guilty of crimes against aboriginal children since the abusers “didn’t know any better at the time.”

But historical records tend to reveal multiple perspectives—not everyone felt or acted the same way—and this calls into question those who say we cannot judge the past. This seems like a contradiction: you should but you shouldn’t judge people and events of the past. Careful and balanced judgment of the past is part of good historical thinking, and it is necessary if we are to have any deep historical understanding.

Activity

The Residential School Experience: A View from the Past

You can get a brief glimpse into the “foreign” world of the past by watching a CBC news broadcast that aired on March 13, 1955 (“A new future.” CBC Archives, <http://archives.cbc.ca/society/education/topics/692-4003/>). Watch the broadcast without the audio and pay attention to the images that you see. Are they largely positive or negative? Watch the broadcast for a second time with the audio playing and take note of the attitudes, beliefs, and values being presented at this time by answering questions 1 to 4 below.

1. What was the prevailing attitude of the Canadian government toward aboriginal children at the time?
2. What was the prevailing attitude of the Canadian government toward children in general at the time?

3. What was the prevailing attitude of mainstream Canadian society to churches (Roman Catholic, Anglican, United)?
4. Imagine you were a non-aboriginal Canadian watching this broadcast in 1955. What would you state were the "facts" about residential schools?
5. As a student in the 21st century, how have these "facts" changed? Why is it important to continue looking for multiple perspectives on historical issues?
6. What differences exist between our ideas of right and wrong today and those that existed at the time on the topics of race, human rights, the rights of children, the role of education, and the role of the church in society?

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Activity: Moving Forward

The following are the words of Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations. They are an excerpt from a speech he gave to Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican on April 29, 2009.

“ . . . For reasons rooted in imperfections of the human condition, those at the highest levels of authority in Canada came to believe that our indigenous cultures, languages, and our ways of worship were not worth keeping and should be eradicated.

“To implement this belief, the Canadian government adopted the policy of forcibly removing indigenous children from their families and communities and placing them in Indian Residential Schools under the care and control of members of Catholic entities and other churches.

“ . . . Many children died in these schools, alone, confused, and bereft. Countless

others were physically, emotionally, and sexually abused. The fabric of family life for thousands of our people, young and old, was shattered.

“We suffered needlessly and tragically. So much was lost for no good reason.

“ . . . But today is a new day. We are here at the Vatican in your presence, Most Holy Father, to change this sad history.

“Our struggle has reached a decisive moment. While the past must never be forgotten, our destiny lies in building a future with enduring foundations, the cornerstone of which must be forgiveness.”

After reflecting on Fontaine’s words and reviewing the material in the *News in Review* video and guide, select an activity from the choices below. Each task asks you to reflect on what you have learned about the legacy of residential schools and the meaning of reconciliation between non-aboriginal and aboriginal peoples.

- Participate in a TRC event. Take a journal to record your thoughts and what you witness.
- Follow the work of the TRC over the course of a semester or an entire school year. Record the key events, challenges, and stories that emerge.
- Write a letter or create a poem, song, prayer, piece of artwork, or video that reflects how you feel about the legacy of residential schools. Consider sharing your work with an aboriginal family or community member, or at an Aboriginal Friendship Centre, or with the TRC itself.
- Teach someone else what you have learned about residential schools in Canada.
- Write a letter to the editor stating your views on the TRC (positive, negative or both).
- Insert “sticky” notes into your textbook that flag important information on residential schools and the TRC. If such information doesn’t already exist, share your updates with the publisher along with a request to update information in future editions.
- Go to the Web site *Where are the Children?* (www.wherethechildren.ca) and further your understanding of this tragic part of history.
- Conduct further research on the history of Australia’s residential school system and prepare a short report that compares that country’s experience to Canada’s.